

INSTANT REACTION TO BUDGET

Most political parties critical

RASHIDUL HASAN

Most political parties were critical about the proposed budget in their initial reaction yesterday, terming it "as usual" and expressing doubts whether it would be possible to achieve the targets.

BNP standing committee member Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury in his reaction said people's livelihood and humanity were totally ignored in this budget.

He also lambasted the government keeping scope for "whitening black money", saying it is an effort to continue corruption.

Jatiya Party, the main opposition party in parliament, in its reaction said it might not be possible to fulfill the target set in the proposed budget due to the global economic turmoil following the coronavirus outbreak.

In a press conference at his office in the capital's Banani, JP Chairman and Deputy Leader of the Opposition GM Quader, however, said, the government has tried to give a public welfare-oriented budget.

"It is necessary to ensure that the allocation is spent properly for the welfare of people, by preventing corruption and waste. Only then the budget will be welfare-oriented," the

JP chairman said.

Rashed Khan Menon, president of Workers Party of Bangladesh and a top leader of the AL-led 14-party alliance said the finance minister's budget proposal is still growth-based.

"It's not right to give priority to growth before people's lives," he said.

"One must think how realistic it was to set the target of GDP growth at 8.2 percent in a Covid-19 affected country amid the global economic condition," Menon said at a press release.

He said reforms in the banking sector, and pension scheme for all -- which was promised by the government -- remained absent in the budget proposal.

He also expressed surprise at the government not imposing tax on wealth and profit. "How much relief will we provide to the rich section of people?" he questioned.

Gonoforum General Secretary Reza Kibria in his reaction said the proposed budget represents an unimaginative response to an economic crisis, that called for boldness and creativity. It is an example of poorly-conceived budgeting based on delusional growth, revenue and financing projections.

Restoring confidence will be one of the most difficult challenges facing those managing the economy, he said.

"The budgeted deficit of 190 thousand crores (6 percent of GDP) is in itself not exceptionally high under the circumstances and in reference to comparable countries. If the money could be spent in a cost-effective manner with low levels of misappropriation and waste, even a higher deficit level would have been acceptable," he said.

"The problem is that at least one-fifth, a conservative estimate, of budget outlays in Bangladesh are lost through corruption."

He also said improving financial governance and tackling corruption are given lip-service in the budget statement, but "people of Bangladesh know whether such statements from this government can be taken seriously."

Communist Party of Bangladesh in its reaction said this budget is as usual, and against the interest of 99 percent people.

Bangladesh National Awami Party (NAP) in its reaction said people will not get benefit of this budget if the government fails to prevent corruption.



With a DIY kite reel -- made out of a plastic bottle and a stick -- between his legs, a boy stands atop a concrete road divider block with his eyes fixed on the kite in the sky as he pulls the string, oblivious to the traffic moving past him. This photo was taken in front of Bashundhara City in the capital on Wednesday. PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Salman Khan new brand ambassador for Pepsi Bangladesh

CITY DESK

Leading beverage brand Pepsi yesterday announced its collaboration with Bollywood superstar Salman Khan as brand ambassador in Bangladesh.

"As a youth centric brand, Pepsi has always had its finger on the pulse of changing times and trends, and this summer, the brand, along with Salman Khan, is bringing to life the one word that defines the youth of today -- swag," says a press release.

"Swag" is at the core of Pepsi's new "Proti-Chumuk-e-Swag" campaign, at the centre of which is Salman Khan, the release said.

The campaign launched yesterday with a TVC featuring the actor, which shows him in his trademark confident and striking avatar.

Speaking about his appointment and the TVC, Salman Khan said, "I am very happy to come on board as Pepsi's brand ambassador in Bangladesh. The people of Bangladesh have shown me tremendous love over the years, and I am sure that they will continue to do so as I start this new journey with Pepsi."



COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The unseen plight of special-needs children

MID SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN

Rozina Akhter, an 11-year-old child with autism, has stayed confined to her home at Mirpur for the last three months and her mother is still struggling to make her understand why school is closed.

"My school is not closed. You don't want me to go to school and that's why you're lying," she insists.

Hundreds of children in Bangladesh are diagnosed every year with neuro-developmental disorders (NDD) such as autism, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, and intellectual disability, and amidst the pandemic, the need to stay indoors has hit them hard.

Many of these children's lives are centered around exercise, play, outdoor activities, regular therapy and training. These children, particularly those from impoverished families, have not been able to access their regular life, and that is taking a toll on them and their families alike.

"In April, Rozina hurt herself twice by thumping on the wall and by banging her head against the door. She did that out of anger as she could not go to school and play with her tutor and friends," said Shahana, Rozina's mother.

Shahana took the initiative to arrange online sessions with Rozina's friends with support from their parents, who were also struggling with their children. "Thanks to these online meetups, she has started to cope a lot better."

Sarder A Razzak, chairman of Down Syndrome Society of Bangladesh, said, "Children with NDD can benefit a lot from online physiotherapy classes and meetups. Through these sessions, they become conscious of the Covid-19 virus, its risks and symptoms. On the other hand, they also get to retain a semblance of their regular lives."

"Children with Down syndrome and intellectual disabilities cope with situations like these better

than children with autism, as the latter are more resistant to change in lifestyle. Besides online sessions, caregivers should also arrange play activities at home so that they don't feel a sudden, drastic change in their daily life," added Razzak.

For children with NDD from impoverished backgrounds, accessing online content is difficult, as is arranging games and exercises at home.

Nilima, another child with Down syndrome, lives with her brother's family in Kamrangirchar. Due to reduced metabolism rate and poor muscle tone, she has to take regular physiotherapy and check up. She used to get therapy at SEID (Society for Education and Inclusion of the Disabled) Summit Community Therapy School at Kamrangirchar, free of cost. However, Nilima cannot access their services now.

Her sister-in-law Taslima said, "We live in a small house. We don't have enough space to stretch our

legs. How can she exercise here?"

Her brother, who was a sales representative, recently lost his job.

"We could not pay rent for two months. The landlord might evict us anytime. We cannot afford medicine and healthy food to Nilima. She is becoming weak in front of our eyes," said Taslima.

The pandemic has also shattered the dream of Sanzid, an autistic youth living in Mohammadpur's Bihari camp, of becoming an earning member of his family.

Sanzid was a student of SEID community therapy school at Mohammadpur, where his talent in music was discovered. He was offered a job of music teacher at the school. However, as the school is closed now, Sanzid's future has become uncertain.

"My father is very ill, but he has to pull a rickshaw to provide for us. I am doing household work, but I wish I could get a job," Sanzid said.

According to SEID, a development organisation for

persons with disabilities, NDD is widespread among children in slums and in poor neighbourhoods of Dhaka. In 2019, SEID enlisted 235 children with disorders as beneficiaries in Mohammadpur Bihari Camp and Kamrangirchar.

Karishma Ahmed, a director of SEID, said, "Most of these families live in extremely congested environments. Social distancing, exercising at home, visiting doctors are impossible for them."

Contacted, Dr Gopen Kumer Kundu, deputy director of the autism cell at the health ministry, stressed the need for inclusive education to reduce vulnerability of children with NDD.

"The government has taken steps to establish at least one inclusive school in every division and gradually in every district. This pandemic has proved that we should speed up this project and establish these schools as soon as possible," he said.



Roadside vendors are slowly coming back to the streets and alleys of the capital, after months of halted business. Seeing this man preparing fried food in Siddik Bazar must have been a relief for many low-income people living and working nearby, for who this is the only snack they can afford. PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Petition seeks lockdown of entire Dhaka

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A Supreme Court lawyer yesterday filed a writ petition with the High Court, seeking its directive on the government to immediately put entire Dhaka city in lockdown excluding parliament functions and other necessary operations for at least two weeks, to contain the coronavirus pandemic.

Advocate Mahbulul Islam submitted the petition through email, requesting the HC to order authorities of the government to ensure that city dwellers stay at home and to provide food and medicine to the poor through local representatives.

Petitioner's lawyer Advocate Manzill Murshid told The Daily Star that the HC may hold hearing on the writ petition virtually on Sunday.

Sheer disregard for public health

Anti-tobacco campaign group Progga says in their budget reaction

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Eleven thousand crore taka in additional revenues could have been raised from tobacco sector if the proposed tax and price measures from the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare were adopted, anti-tobacco campaigning organisation Progga said in an instant budget reaction yesterday.

"The proposed budget not only ignored WHO's repeated health warnings but also showed sheer indifference to the opportunity of generating additional revenues and saving lives. The four-tier pricing of cigarettes has been kept untouched, thus continuing the option for consumers to just switch to a cheaper tier. This will also encourage the youth to take up smoking," the group said in a press statement.

The price for 10 sticks of low-tier cigarettes has been increased by only Tk 2, setting the price at Tk 39, which means the hike per stick will be only 20 paise or 5.4 percent. Such increase is very negligible considering the fact that during the same time the National Income Per Capita (Nominal) has increased by 11.60 percent. It should be noted that 72 percent of all cigarette smokers are users of low-tier products. The supplementary duty

on this tier has been increased to 57 percent from 55 percent.

"If the proposed budget is adopted, it will eventually reduce the real price of cigarettes and encourage its use," the statement said.

For bidi (local tobacco product), the increase per stick is negligible 16 paise. For smokeless tobacco products, the price per 10 grams of jarda has increased by Tk 10, setting the price at Tk 40, which is indeed a satisfactory move, added the press release.

However, the increase is only Tk 5 per 10g of gul. As a result, the use of such products among women and the poor will not see any major decrease.

Overall, this proposed budget will have zero effect in generating additional revenue, preventing premature deaths and curbing spread of coronavirus, the statement also said.

The 37.8 million adults who consume tobacco and 41 million people who fall victim to secondhand smoke will remain in grave health risk. Above all, the sheer disregard for public health as evident in this proposed budget will hinder the realisation of a tobacco-free Bangladesh by 2040, Progga said in their reaction.

Ctg-8 MP, family members test Covid-19 positive

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

Moslem Uddin Chowdhury, lawmaker for Chattogram-8 (Boalkhali-Chandgaon) constituency, and nine of his family members have tested Covid-19 positive.

Sheikh Fazle Rabbi, civil surgeon of Chattogram, told The Daily Star they were diagnosed on Wednesday.

The family members went to Dhaka to avail better treatment, according to family and party sources. Apart from Moslem, who is also the president of Awami League Chattogram district (south), his wife, two daughters, son-in-law, three grandsons and two house helps tested positive.

Earlier on June 2, lawmaker Mostafizur Rahman of Chattogram-16 tested positive for Covid-19, along with a number of his family members. The affected include the lawmaker's wife, three daughters, one son-in-law, grandchild, his personal secretary and three house helps.



Continue TCB sale at upazilas: HC

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The High Court yesterday directed the government to continue selling essential commodities through Trading Corporation Bangladesh (TCB) to people at upazila level, beyond the city corporations and municipality areas, until the coronavirus pandemic ends.

The HC bench of Justice JBM Hassan passed the order after the government yesterday submitted a report saying that it has already started selling TCB's essential goods to people at upazila level in line with this court's June 3 directive.

Deputy Attorney General Samarendranath Biswas placed the compliance report on behalf of the government during holding a virtual hearing on a writ petition.

Following the same writ petition, the HC bench on June 3 had ordered the principal secretary to the prime minister's office, commerce secretary and chairman of TCB to take necessary measures in the next seven days to sell the TCB's essential goods to people at upazila level beyond city corporations and municipality areas during the coronavirus pandemic.

The court also asked them to submit a report to it yesterday after complying with the directives.

The HC bench passed the order following a writ petition filed by rights organisation Law and Life Foundation, seeking necessary directives.

Law and Life Foundation submitted the writ petition on May 31 to the HC saying that the TCB's daily essentials are currently sold to people in city corporation and municipality areas at a minimum rate while those in upazila levels are deprived of the TCB goods.



Markets and malls across the country may have opened, but most of them, like the Shah Ali Market in the capital's Mirpur, is almost entirely devoid of customers. While their caution is justified in avoiding public places like this where narrow alleys make social distancing a far cry, it has left shop owners worried about making a living for themselves and paying their staff on time, as there are little to no sales. PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN